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Courting Bluebeard with Bartók, Atwood, and Fowles: Modern Treatment of the Bluebeard Theme

> We cannot turn back. We cannot choose the dreams of unknowing. We shall, I expect, open the last door in the castle even if it leads, perhaps *because* it leads, on to realities which are beyond the reach of human comprehension and control. We shall do so with that desolate clairvoyance, so marvellously rendered in Bartók's music, because opening doors is the tragic merit of our identity.
>
> George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*

THE TITLE of George Steiner's chilling reassessment of European culture, *In Bluebeard's Castle,* highlights a question of importance and fascination for contemporary writers. According to Steiner, our civilization is mesmerized by the danger and challenge of the Bluebeard situation "because opening doors is the tragic merit of our identity."[1] As Steiner also points out, Béla Bartók's opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911), portrays the elements of the Bluebeard tale with a portentous darkness most appropriate in this century. Indeed, I would argue that Steiner's intuition about the opera should be developed further because *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* appears to be the key influence upon certain later writers who are drawn to the Bluebeard theme, notably John Fowles and

[1] George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 106.

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Margaret Atwood.[2] In the following discussion of the Bluebeard theme, I would like to analyze the elements of the tale, especially Bartók's adaptation of theme, and their subsequent use by Fowles in *The Collector* (1963) and Atwood in *Lady Oracle* (1976). Of course, Bluebeard enjoyed great popularity in the nineteenth century, but this story (via Bartók) speaks with special force to this century and to artists such as Fowles and Atwood who are deeply concerned with polarities and aggression.

Although there are at least three well-known versions of the Bluebeard tale, Bartók's opera is the influence singled out by Fowles and Atwood. Overt references to the tale do not appear in *The Collector,* but according to Fowles, "I went to see the first performance [in the 1950s] in London of Bartók's opera, *Bluebeard's Castle* [sic]. It wasn't a very good performance, but the thing that struck me was the symbolism of the man imprisoning women underground."[3] About a year later he read a newspaper account of a London kidnapping, and this, together with Bartók's symbolism, led to his conception of the novel. Atwood, more eclectic than Fowles in her use of Bluebeard sources, drew attention to the opera in an unpublished interview,[4] but references to the tale are obvious in her novel and occur elsewhere in her work. Fascinating as this coincidence in source may be, however, it points to more than a superficial similarity between *The Collector* and *Lady Oracle*. Atwood and Fowles share an extensive common ground which is implicit in their use of the Bluebeard story with its rich application to twentieth-century society, politics, and psychology. Just as the earliest codified versions of the Bluebeard story are more accurately described as cautionary tales than fairy tales, so the use of Bluebeard by Bartók, Atwood, and Fowles is in large part admonitory.

But what is the significance of the Bluebeard story? The outlines of the tale are simple: a wealthy, powerful man brings his young bride to his castle and forbids her to open a certain door; when she insists on knowing what lies beyond the door, dire consequences ensue. The

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[2] Without making a deliberate search for clear references to Bluebeard in twentieth-century literature instances come readily to mind in the work of Anne Hébert, Jay Macpherson, and Vladimir Nabokov. Aspects of the theme occur in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (via Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" and two films, Weine's *The Hands of Orlac* [1924] and Freund's remake *Mad Love* [1935]), but an excellent example of the attention the subject has recently received is Daryl Hine's poem, "Bluebeard's Wife," *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 28–29, which draws upon Bartók's opera.

[3] Fowles discusses the inspiration for and the purpose of *The Collector* in his interview with Roy Newquist in *Counterpoint* (Rand McNally, 1964), p. 219.

[4] Atwood mentioned the influence of Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* in a conversation with me in the spring of 1978.

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simplicity of the tale is both deceptive and effective because it touches upon hidden springs in human behavior at several levels. As a story of a power struggle between opposing social forces or groups, it provides the basis for what Fowles calls "the opposition of the Few and the Many."[5] As a portrayal of that age-old battle of sexual politics, it is a surprisingly rich tale because, depending upon the outcome or the listener's/reader's point of view, it has something to say to male and female. In psychoanalytical terms, the story relates to both male and female psyches: if you are male, then the story projects problems with the anima; if you are female, then Bluebeard, as one critic describes him, "embodies the deathlike, ferocious aspects of the animus in his most diabolical form."[6] Finally, there is one further level upon which to interpret Bluebeard and his story, and that is as a metaphor for the human imagination and as a paradigm of the creative process. At least insofar as modern literature is concerned, language and the artist who deliberately manipulates and controls discourse function as castles and Bluebeards in relation to the processes of life and to us, the readers. Unlike Jane Eyre who could say of her reformed Bluebeard, Mr. Rochester, "Reader, I married him," in reading Fowles and Atwood we court Bluebeards who continuously escape our reforming urges, in castles which are subtle verbal traps.

II

The first associations that come to mind for the "fairy tale" of Bluebeard which we know from Perrault or the Grimms are Biblical and mythological. Bluebeard's wives may remind us of Eve and Bluebeard himself of a jealous god, or by opening a forbidden door the women may suggest a parallel with Pandora, an equally curious and troublesome spouse. The stories of Eros and Psyche and of Ariadne in the labyrinth also provide interesting parallels with the Bluebeard tale—Psyche because she disobeys a husband's command not to *see* him (that is, to know more about him, to shed light upon him), and Ariadne because, in her thread, she holds the key to escape from a deadly place. These classical and Biblical echoes should be kept in mind during the following discussion for two reasons: firstly, they will be picked up and explored by Bartók, Atwood, and Fowles, and secondly, they suggest that the sources of the story lie deep in the religious tabus, rituals, and

[5] Newquist, p. 218.

[6] Marie-Louise von Franz, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Fairy Tales* (Switzerland: Spring Publications, 1975), p. 125.

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oral traditions of man. Indeed, Bluebeard is one of the "Forbidden Chamber" cylce of folktales.[7] It can be traced, as well, in European folk ballads, and the opening-of-a-forbidden-door motif bears striking resemblance to basic elements in the *Arabian Nights*.[8] One critic has argued convincingly that the Bluebeard story—at least as it appears in Western Europe—has a historical basis in the life of one Gilles de Rais, a fifteenth-century feudal lord executed for murder, sodomy, and witchcraft in 1440.[9]

However we try to account for the existence of the Bluebeard story, the fact remains that it was not until 1697 that it received its clearest codification in Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé,* and it is to the so-called fairy tale treatments of Bluebeard that I would now like to turn.[10] In Perrault's "Barbe Bleue," a wealthy country gentleman with an unprepossessing blue beard persuades a young woman to marry him and then, before leaving home on a sudden trip, gives her the keys to his apartments with this warning:

> "As regards this little key, it is the key of the small room at the end of the long passage on the lower floor. You may open everything, you may go everywhere, but I forbid you to enter this little room. And I forbid you so seriously that if you were indeed to open the door, I should be so angry that I might do anything." [11]

This is the classic formulation of the prohibition, apparently quite arbitrary and unmotivated, reminiscent, in its tone, of God in the Gar-

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[7] Macleod Yearsley, *The Folklore of the Fairy-Tale* (London: Watts, 1924), pp. 121–23.

[8] Although I have not yet been able to locate the exact reference in Hungarian folksong which may have influenced Bartók, I am aware of two citations of folksong treatment of the subject: in "Gilles de Rais and the Bluebeard Legend in France," *The Michigan Academician,* VI:1, p. 85, Harriet Mowshowitz quotes a Bréton *complainte,* and in "Bartók and Wagner," in Todd Crow, ed., *Bartók Studies* (Detroit Reprints, 1976), from articles appearing in *The New Hungarian Quarterly,* Ferenc Bónis refers in passing to influence from "the imagery of the Székely folk ballad" (p. 88). More important than the "Open Sesame" of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" is the *Arabian Nights* story, "Prince Agib," about a man who is punished with blindness and exile for opening a forbidden door.

[9] In her Ph.D. dissertation, "Bluebeard and French Literature," University of Michigan, 1970, and her article "Gilles de Rais and the Bluebeard Legend in France" (see Note 8), Harriet Mowshowitz discusses the historical basis for Bluebeard and the popularity, amounting to an obsession, of the subject in nineteenth-century France. A biography of de Rais has recently been published: Leonard Woolf, *The Life and Crimes of Gilles de Rais* (Clarkson Potter/Crown, 1980).

[10] There is some critical argument as to whether or not Perrault's "Barbe Bleue" is, in fact, a fairy story. Bruno Bettleheim argues that it is not in *The Uses of Enchantment* (Vintage, 1977), pp. 299–303, because of its paucity of magic, the lack of character transformation, and the absence of an affirmatory ending. Bettleheim argues that "Barbe Bleue" and its related stories are cautionary tales about sexual curiosity, betrayal, and revenge. I do not think Bettleheim's reservations are important for my discussion or are entirely accurate, especially when applied to the Grimms's "Fitcher's Bird" or the related English stories. For another view on the question, see Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[11] "Barbe Bleue," Charles Perrault's *Complete Fairy Tales,* trans. A. E. Johnson et al. (Dodd, Mead, 1961), p. 80. In the interest of consistency, all references and quotations from French, German, and Hungarian are in English translations; I do not read Hungarian.

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den of Eden; and the wife, of course, disobeys. When she opens the door she sees the butchered wives, and in her horror drops the key in the blood. Because the blood has indelibly marked the key, Bluebeard immediately realizes that she has transgressed, and he condemns her to death. The helpless wife, however, is saved in the nick of time by her brothers who kill Bluebeard, thus enabling her to inherit all his wealth, to reward her brothers, and to marry "a very worthy man, who banished from her mind all memory of the evil days she had spent with Blue Beard." [12]

Perrault provides two morals for his tale, morals which are suitable for his sophisticated seventeenth-century salon audience: that female curiosity is deadly, and that husbands should not be impossibly demanding. Closer examination of the structure of the story suggests, however, that curiosity (the desire for knowledge and experience, sexual or other), while dangerous, is worth the risk of acquiring it. Bluebeard is the villain not only because he murders vengefully, but also because he imposes his arbitrary prohibition in the first place, in order to preserve his secret, and then provides the key. Opening the door reveals the truth, and even if the wife is too weak to escape through her own merits, her eventual generosity and happiness surely suggest that she did the brave, the right, thing in disobeying. The initial situation of danger and threat is transformed into safety; ignorance and fear are replaced by knowledge and security; secrecy, deception, and crime are discovered and punished.

In the Grimms's "Fitcher's Bird," there are a number of additional details, but the basic structure, what Vladimir Propp calls the morphology of the tale, is the same.[13] (I shall return to Propp's analysis of this folktale shortly.) Here the role of Bluebeard is played by a wicked wizard who kidnaps three sisters, one after the other, and carries them off to his castle. Before he will marry, the girl must pass his test; therefore, he gives her the keys to his rooms, plus a precious egg which she must not lose, and warns her against opening the forbidden door. As soon as he leaves she opens the door and finds corpses in a basin of blood. In her horror, she drops the egg in the blood which cannot then be washed off. Sisters one and two join the corpses, but sister three is more cunning. She leaves the egg outside the door, puts her sisters together again, and is able to deceive the wizard upon his return that very night. When the wizard declares that he will marry her, she agrees

[12] Perrault, p. 87.

[13] V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (University of Texas Press, 1968).

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and asks him to carry baskets of gold (in which she has hidden her sisters) to her parents. Then she disguishes herself as a bird and flees. Her parents burn the wizard, together with his house, when he returns for his marriage feast.[14]

The two important differences between this and Perrault's version are the purposeful nature of the prohibition, which from the male point of view is a premarital test, and the independent resourcefulness of the third sister who discovers the wizard's villainy, saves her sisters and herself, and makes retribution possible. Again, knowledge, though dangerous, is necessary and good, while secrecy and crime must be challenged, revealed, and punished. The prohibition/test is evil, or at least socially unacceptable. Although by no means as straightforward as Perrault's "Barbe Bleue," "Fitcher's Bird" portrays the same transformation of an initial negative situation into its opposite.[15]

As we turn from the fairy tale to the literary treatments of Bluebeard in this century, some crucial differences appear not merely in the details used to elaborate the tale, but in the structure and in the self-conscious, purposeful, symbolic use of the material.[16] When Bartók began work on

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[14] "Fitcher's Bird," *The Complete Grimms's Fairy Tales* (Pantheon, 1944), pp. 216–20.

[15] Anonymous English versions of Bluebeard tales, such as "Mr. Fox," may well predate Perrault; certainly these stories closely resemble others in the forbidden chamber group. In "Mr. Fox," the villain courts a Lady who knows nothing about him. Before they are to marry, she sets out to explore his castle. When she arrives there, she passes through three doors, the last of which bears the warning—"Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold,/Lest That Your Heart's Blood Should Run Cold." She opens the door and finds the bodies of murdered women, but before she can escape, Mr. Fox returns dragging another victim. In his impatience to remove his victim's ring, he chops off her hand which flies into the Lady's hiding place. She escapes while he is busy murdering his victim, only to present him with the narration of these events and the severed hand at their betrothal breakfast next day. Mr. Fox is then promptly cut to pieces by her brothers. Here, as in "Fitcher's Bird," the woman is not yet a wife, but more importantly, the arbitrary prohibition is absent and a much weaker form of warning occurs instead. As well, the cunning of the woman is reduced to a more straight-forward daring, and Mr. Fox lacks the complexity and mystery of Bluebeard. The basic structure of the tale, however, remains identical with that of Perrault's "Barbe Bleue" and Grimms's "Fitcher's Bird": an initial situation of ignorance, secrecy, and crime is reversed so that the final outcome again suggests that being bold, though dangerous, is salutary. I am indebted to Macleod Yearsley (see note 7) for the "Mr. Fox" story. Yearsley also points out that Dickens recreated Bluebeard in his Captain Murderer. The story was used by Thackeray in his "Bluebeard's Ghost" (see note 16) and referred to by Dickens in *Bleak House*, Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, and George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss*.

[16] Although the enormous task of examining pre-twentieth century literary treatments, in addition to the fairy tales and contemporary versions, is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to point out that earlier novelists were also aware of the grim psychological potential of the story. While Bartók, Atwood, and Fowles were not, to the best of my knowledge, influenced by Thackeray, he did explore the negative possibilities of Bluebeard. In "Bluebeard's Ghost" (1843), *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Kensington Edition Vol. XXIX (Scribner's, 1904), pp. 402–33, Thackeray satirized Bluebeard's fictional reputation as well as contemporary mores, but I am grateful to Professor Juliet McMaster for pointing out to me that Thackeray's treatment of the Bluebeard story was not always so lighthearted. In *Thackeray: The Major Novels* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 189, she suggests that, "in Thackeray's version of the Bluebeard myth, which he handled more than once, women are particularly attracted to Bluebeard, even when they know of his nefarious deeds; in 'Barbazure' Fatima's cousin 'would give her eyes' to become his tenth wife, and actually stands by at the proposed execution of her predecessor so as to be first in line for the succession. *Barry Lyndon* is a more realistic and extended version of the story, but the same perversity is in operation." For a more detailed account of the popularity of Bluebeard in nineteenth-century England and an analysis of Thackeray's treatment of the theme in a

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his opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, he chose Béla Balázs (best known as an early film aesthetician) as his librettist, and Balázs apparently found his source in Maeterlinck's play, *Ariane et Barbe Bleue, ou la déliverance inutile* (1901).[17]

Maeterlinck's three-act play has been described as "one of the first dramatic analyses of the liberated woman,"[18] because while following the fairy-tale emphasis upon the woman in the story, it provides socio-sexual explanation and motivation. Bluebeard and his bride, Ariane, arrive at his castle amidst an angry mob of peasants, and after he has gone off to deal with the peasants, we learn from Ariane that she may open six of the doors, but not the seventh for which she has a small gold key.[19] Ariane, however, is not interested in the six rooms, each one bursting with precious jewels; she wants to find the forbidden door and confirm her suspicions of her husband. When she finds her five predecessors alive, cowering in the darkness of a crypt, she announces that she has come to set them free. The women, however, refuse to go, and Ariane sets forth, leaving behind her a defeated Bluebeard with his five pale shadows for wives. Here, even more than in the fairy tales, the last wife's discovery of the dark secret is presented as a moral, social, and, I think, psychological duty. The women who stay behind deserve their fate, as does Bluebeard: the wives are imprisoned and Bluebeard is unfulfilled and fundamentally alone.

Only Ariane has faced these feeble aspects of her unconscious, her "anima women," as Marie-Louise von Franz would call them. In fact, von Franz's Jungian description of "anima women" illuminates Maeterlinck's symbolism, as well as the power struggle in the fairy tales, very well:

> [Anima women] are conscious of themselves only as mirrors of the man's reaction. . . . It is only a man's reaction to them which makes them aware of their feminine personality.

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hitherto unpublished fragment of a play, see Juliet McMaster, "'Bluebeard at Breakfast': An Unpublished Thackeray Manuscript," *Dickens Studies Annual*, VIII (1981), 197–230.

[17] Most discussions of the libretto point out the connection between Balázs and Maeterlinck, but the differences between the two texts are far more striking than their similarities, and I suspect that Bartók and Balázs knew of other Bluebeard stories (possibly in Hungarian folksongs) which would help to explain the primitive power of the libretto. There have been several other Bluebeard operas: Grétry's *Raoul Barbe-Bleue* (1789), Offenbach's *Barbe-Bleue*—in English, *Bluebeard Repaired*—(1866), Dukas's setting of Maeterlinck's play which Balázs may have seen at the Opéra Comique in 1907, and Rezniček's *Ritter Blaubart* (1920). All of these are romantic, comic operas derived from Grétry.

[18] Bettina Knapp, *Maurice Maeterlinck* (G. K. Hall, 1973), p. 101. Knapp points out the links between the play and the Cretan Ariadne and discusses not only the social and sexual meaning of the play, but its psychological symbolism as well.

[19] Maurice Maeterlinck, *Sister Beatrice and Ariane and Barbe Bleue*, trans. Bernard Miall (Dodd, Mead, 1910).

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> Thus some women give in entirely to the anima projection [because they are] afraid of losing the man's affection.[20]

This problem of accepting or rejecting the man's anima projection, or of confronting Bluebeard as animus, is integral to Bartók's and Fowles's use of the subject, while anyone at all familiar with Atwood will recognize the appropriateness of von Franz's mirror formulation to her work.

If Maeterlinck illustrates how the tale of Bluebeard applies to broad social and fairly obvious female psychological issues, Bartók's opera, in its music as well as its libretto, offers a profoundly disturbing picture of the darkest and most private recesses of the *male* psyche; in writing his libretto, Balázs altered his source dramatically. In addition, the structure of the libretto differs markedly from all the other versions of the tale examined here. Following Propp, I would suggest that in the fairy tales, as in Maeterlinck's play, there are three basic functions: a) the initiating prohibition (or test) by Bluebeard, b) the transgression by the wife, and c) the transformation or reversal of the initial situation.[21] In the one-act opera, however, prohibition and transgression are interestingly conflated, and the reversal does not take place.

Before the opera commences, a prologue is spoken by a Bard who reminds us that the legend is both ancient and symbolic of an inner truth. When Judith enters the dark castle with Duke Bluebeard, she announces that (like Psyche and Ariadne) she will bring light and love into his world—beginning with the seven locked doors that confront them. Although reluctant, Bluebeard gives her five keys, and they go around the castle opening the doors together. Each door Judith opens allows increasing light to flood the hall, but the contents of the rooms are puzzling—a torture chamber, an armory, a treasury, a secret garden, and a spacious kingdom, all sprinkled or soaked in blood. When Judith turns to Bluebeard in alarm and demands to open the last two doors, he demurs, warning her that darkness will return if she does. She insists, and opens the sixth door to discover a pool of tears; the hall begins to grow dark. Now Judith guesses that his former murdered wives are behind the seventh door. But when she inquires, he warns,

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[20] Marie Louise von Franz, *Problems of the Feminine in Fairytales* (University of Dallas/Spring Publications, 1972), p. 2. Here, von Franz studies feminine figures in a group of fairy tales from the point of view of anima versus woman (separate female character) distinctions.

[21] Propp analyses thirty-one "functions" which characterize the structure of all folk tales, but in his summary he describes this structure as tripartite: "Morphologically, a tale may be termed any development proceeding from a villainy or a lack, through intermediary functions to marriage, or to other functions employed as a denouement. Terminal functions are at times a reward, a gain or in general the liquidation of misfortune . . ." Propp, p. 92.

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"Thou who art my castle's daylight
kiss me, kiss me. Ask no questions."[22]

At her continued insistence, Bluebeard, who has become increasingly proud and dominant (musically), tells her to open the door and see his other wives whom he does not forget. For an opera which was originally accused of lacking action and drama, this is a most chilling and powerful moment. As the door opens, three beautiful, pale, silent women come forth while Bluebeard falls on his knees before them. Bluebeard tells Judith that the first is dressed as dawn because that is when he found her; the second is immortalized as noon and the third as twilight. In a crescendo of exultant pride, he proclaims,

"Radiant, royal! Matchless beauty!
They shall ever live immortal.
They have gathered all my riches.
They have bled to feed my flowers.
Yea, they have enlarged my kingdom.
All is theirs now, all my treasures."

The hall darkens as he decks Judith out as his Queen of the Night, while she suddenly becomes passive, protests weakly, then follows the others silently into the room. The door closes, the castle is dark, and standing alone Bluebeard sings, "Henceforth all shall be darkness, darkness, darkness."

Unlike Ariadne, or Psyche, Judith fails to bring light or love to Bluebeard, and unlike Ariane she fails to escape her own fate. The opening of doors dooms her from the start; Bluebeard's love is implacable; the initial situation of inquiry which is never absolutely interdicted develops without transformation or reversal. And even if one thinks of the wives' fate as a transformation of sorts, it must surely be seen as negative; the real woman is subsumed in symbol or myth, and Bluebeard is "dead."

Halsey Stevens, one of Bartók's biographers, calls Balázs' libretto an allegory:

> Bluebeard is Everyman, whose happiness is contingent upon those he loves, but who is powerless to hold them except in memory; the fulfillment he seeks is ever denied him. In her desire to open his inner life to the light, Judith finally awakens the memory of Bluebeard's earlier loves, and is thereby condemned to join them in eternal night. The tragedy is not hers, but Bluebeard's.[23]

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[22] This translation of the libretto is by John Coombs and accompanies the 1979 Deutsche Grammaphon recording with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Julia Varady. I do not believe that Balázs' three mystery plays, *Miszteriumok*, which includes the Bluebeard libretto, have been translated.

[23] Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 290. In "Bluebeard at Breakfast," McMaster points out that Thackeray saw Bluebeard as a type of Everyman.

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That the opera is an allegory is debatable, but it is undeniably a tragedy for both characters. Psychologically, Bluebeard destroys his real women in favor of his anima. Or if one were to interpret the work from the female point of view, Judith is destroyed by her animus (see von Franz's description of the animus quoted above). Equally important to an interpretation of the opera, however, are the larger sociological ramifications of the plot. As in the fairy tales and Maeterlinck's play, there are three characters—Bluebeard, Judith (the wives), and the Castle. But here the four wives represent nature in its temporal cycle which the man wants to control in order to satisfy his desire to master and possess; thus, the opera implies that the only relationship with nature which man can accept is to have it locked up with his other things. More broadly, the castle represents Bluebeard's world, our world, reduced to silence and darkness by our brutal acquisitiveness.

An interpretation such as this may have occurred to Fowles and have contributed to his use of the incarceration symbolism in *The Collector,* while for Atwood, the psychological power of the work seems more important. Psychologically, Bartók's opera parallels the unconscious struggle in the other versions of the tale, but with a far darker, indeed tragic, message. The "happy ending" of the fairy tale, on any level, has gone; knowing and having are equally destructive; male and female, man and nature are doomed. By using the Bluebeard story, but radically altering its structure, Bartók presents his vision of human self-destruction. Fowles and Atwood follow his lead.

III

John Fowles's *The Collector* is a taut, polished, devastating horror story. Through its carefully formulated tripartite structure and its first-person narrative, Fowles ensnares his unsuspecting readers much as Frederick Clegg traps his victim, Miranda Grey. In part one, the lower class Clegg, who has just won a considerable sum of money, tells us about himself and his obsession with a beautiful upper-middle class girl whom he must admire from afar, until we begin to feel sympathy for his loneliness and frustration. But it is with gradually increasing fascination and horror that we listen to him describe his plans for a cellar room in a country house, watch him capture his victim, and observe the long spiritual and physical battle between them. Clegg, with his lifelong passion for lepidopterology and his newly acquired taste for pornographic photography, is a collector of the most fanatic sort. He is also a Bluebeard, for he collects people; in his words,

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> what she never understood was that with me it was having. Having her was enough. Nothing needed doing. I just wanted to have her, and safe at last.[24]

Full of class resentment, banalities, and prejudices, intensely secretive, impotent, and insecure, Clegg's professed love for Miranda is for a static anima figure which will reflect favorably upon his crippled psyche. The real woman of will, intelligence, and sexuality he loathes (*C*, 114).

It is with shock that one recognizes the first-person voice in part two to be Miranda's. She alleviates her loneliness and terror by talking to herself and her friends in a diary; this is her sole means of retaining a grasp on her own sanity. Although Miranda, an art student at the Slade, does indeed have some of the snobbishness of her class, Fowles's interest and sympathy are clearly with her and all she represents in the novel. She calls Clegg Caliban, a representative of the "beastly Calibanity" (*C*, 217) of the majority, but important as this reference may be to Fowles's parable of the Few and the Many, the strength of the novel lies in the physical and psychological power struggle of the situation. At moments she feels she must discover his secret, play beauty to his beast (*C*, 248); at other moments she realizes that she is in a modern Bluebeard's castle from which there is no escape:

> I am one in a row of specimens. It's when I try to flutter out of line that he hates me. I'm meant to be dead, pinned, always the same, always beautiful. He knows that part of my beauty is being alive, but it's the dead me he wants. He wants me living-but-dead. . . .
>
> He is solid; immovable, iron-willed. He showed me one day what he called his killing-bottle. I'm imprisoned in it. Fluttering against the glass. Because I can see through it I still think I can escape. I have hope. But it's all an illusion.
>
> A thick round wall of glass. (*C*, 215)

Miranda does die, of course, because Clegg knows that if he fetches a doctor for her pneumonia he will lose his prize possession. In part three, Clegg tells us that he has buried Miranda in his garden, "in a box I made, under the apple trees" (*C*, 287). Then, in a shift to the present tense, he announces that the room is "cleaned out and good as new" and that he has spied another girl, called Marian, who resembles Miranda. The present tense makes it appallingly clear that Clegg is undetected, his secret inviolate, and that he will continue his collecting. Clegg is as trapped by his need to have, to collect, as are his victims. And we have been allowed to open the doors of Fowles's text until we come face to face, in the small present space of the novel's last page,

[24] John Fowles, *The Collector* (Triad/Panther, 1976) pp. 104–05. All further references are to this readily available edition. The novel was originally published by Cape in 1963.

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with the Bluebeard who lives there. From this innermost room of obsession there can be no escape, only repetition.

As I have already mentioned, Fowles thinks of *The Collector* as an illustration of "the opposition of the Few and the Many," an idea which he explains at length in *The Aristos*.[25] Miranda is a representative of the Few, the *aristoi*, who comprise the moral and intellectual elite of society; furthermore, as a woman, she represents for Fowles "kinesis, or process" in opposition to the male's "stasis, or conservatism."[26] Like Eve, Psyche, and Ariadne, or the wives in the Bluebeard fairy tale, she represents responsibility and controlled progress, but she must have her freedom to be herself if she is to be valued by society. Clegg (the Caliban to her Miranda) represents the Many, the *hoi polloi,* "with [his] hatred of the unusual, [his] wanting everybody to be the same" (*C,* 220). In Fowles's terms, Clegg is the old Adam in mankind, anxious to subjugate everything other than himself and through naming and collecting to stop the essential *processes* of life. And as Fowles says in *The Aristos*, "Adam is a princeling in a mountain castle; raids and fortifications, his own power and his own prestige, obsess him."[27] Bluebeard is his fairy–tale name; he is society's collective animus run wild.

Following Bartók's *Bluebeard* with its "symbolism of the man imprisoning woman underground," Fowles gives us his version of society trapped in its own madness. But I think Fowles has followed Bartók in a still more profound sense: if Clegg as Bluebeard represents Everyman, then Clegg's home, complete with hidden room and locked door, is not merely his castle, but his world (see *C*, 19), and Miranda, like Judith, is a part of nature. This last equation, however, requires some further discussion. That Miranda represents nature, or the natural order, should be clear. Clegg admires her naturalness, her simplicity and lack of affectation; he also enjoys her freshness, her clean smell; he refers to her as "bigger game," photographs her (using the camera as an instrument of violation), and thinks of her from the start as a rare specimen with hair "very pale, silky, like burnet cocoons" (*C*, 5). Butterflies are less a metaphor for Miranda than she is a metonomy for Clegg's collection.

Fowles's metonymic use of Miranda is appropriate because he maintains that mankind's present dilemma stems from his antagonistic abuse

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[25] John Fowles, *The Aristos*, rev. ed. (Little, Brown, 1970), p. 9. *The Aristos* was originally published in 1965, one year after *The Collector*. For Miranda's theorizing about the Few and the Many, see pp. 217–20.

[26] *Aristos*, pp. 165–66.

[27] *Aristos*, p. 166.

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and fear of nature.[28] In his recent Introduction to *Trees*, he pleads with us to recognize that through our hostility, our taxonomies, even through language itself—a tool, like all tools, which disturbs and rearranges "primordial nature and reality"—we violate "the green man" within us, as well as the natural world. In terms remarkably akin to Atwood's, he writes,

> As long as nature is seen as in some way outside us, frontiered and foreign, *separate*, it is lost both to us and in us. . . . The evolution of human mentality has put us all *in vitro* now, behind the glass wall of our own ingenuity. . . . In the end what we most defoliate is ourselves.[29]

Fowles's words here echo Miranda's: we are Bluebeard with nature in our "killing-bottle" surrounded by a "thick round wall of glass." Paradoxically, Fowles as artist, though less self-consciously here than in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *The Magus*, knows that his characters and his readers are living beings trapped in the castle of his art.

Half way through her *apologia*, Joan Foster, the heroine of Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, reflects,

> in any labyrinth I would have let go of the thread in order to follow a wandering light, a fleeting voice. In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stupid sisters who open the forbidden door and are shocked by the murdered wives, not the third, clever one who keeps to the essentials. . . .[30]

Joan, who is thinking here of the Grimms's "Fitcher's Bird" and linking it with Ariadne, is an inveterate opener of doors. But the somewhat flippant, mock-serious tone of this narrative voice reassures us that in *Lady Oracle* we are closer to parody than tragedy. And yet Joan's life is more than a mere pastiche of Gothic threats, romantic escapes, and fantasized Bluebeards; the parodic web of the text is serious.

From her dubious refuge in Terremoto, Italy, Joan Foster tells us that she has staged her drowning in Lake Ontario and fled to Europe in order to escape the increasingly labyrinthine confusions of her life. In fact, Joan has always been alarmed and confused by life. Raised in a succession of Toronto suburbs, the only daughter of a svelte, socially ambitious mother, she was lonely, unloved, and insecure. In retaliation against this mother and all she seemed to represent, Joan ate until she swelled to

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[28] According to Fowles, the "male association of femininity with rapability extends far beyond the female body . . . anything not based on brute power is rapable . . ." *Aristos*, p. 166.

[29] Fowles's discussion of nature and man's destructive relation to it is crucial to an understanding of his philosophy and ethics and has been very useful in this study. Fowles stresses that we must realize a relationship with the physical world that transcends historical Western dichotomies if we hope to save ourselves or our planet. My references are to "Seeing Nature Whole," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1979, p. 67.

[30] Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 152.

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two hundred pounds. Cheated of beauty in a ballet recital where she was forced to dance as a mothball instead of a dainty butterfly, tormented by sadistic Brownies, and ignored at school, Joan found affection in her eccentric Aunt Lou who treated her to emotional Hollywood films such as *Interrupted Melody* (*LO*, 81) and *The Red Shoes* (*LO*, 82). Like Catharine Moreland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Joan was brought up on sensational fare—with predictable results.[31]

It is when Joan loses weight in order to inherit Aunt Lou's money, however, that we come to the heart of Joan's story and, I think, the key to Atwood's book: "The thought of going on with the same kind of life for ever and ever depressed me. I wanted to have more than one life" Joan admits (*LO*, 141). As soon as she reaches the stipulated weight and can claim the money, she sets forth to fabricate another life. Not long after arriving in England, she meets a Polish emigré who inspires her to write Costume Gothics. In fact, her current Gothic pot-boiler, "Stalked by Love," appears interspersed with the main text of her narration. Joan soon leaves her Polish Count, however, for marriage to the more Byronic-seeming Arthur Foster. Back in Toronto, she maintains her secret writing career, publishes a book of bizarre poems, and alleviates the tedium of her marriage in a fling with a "con-create" poet. By this time Joan is leading more than one new life, as she herself realizes: "I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many" (*LO*, 246).

Although Joan appears to welcome this multiplicity of selves, she is constantly obsessed with the need for surface simplicity and single-mindedness. When Arthur becomes sullen, the rejected poet angry, and a local blackmailer turns up simultaneously with her Polish Count, Joan cannot cope. Pursued by fantasies of villainous, rapacious males, "their fangs dripping blood" (*LO*, 284), Joan flees; she has totally confused these animus projections with the real men in her life until all distinction between reality and fantasy is lost. Furthermore, as Joan's story progresses, it becomes increasingly conflated with "Stalked by Love" until her identification with the female characters in the Costume Gothic is complete. The results of this conflation, in so-called reality, are easy to summarize: believing that a Bluebeard-like figure is knocking on the door of her room, she pulls it open and knocks the villain out with a Cinzano bottle; however, this new man in her life turns out to be

[31] Atwood places *Lady Oracle*, as a parody of the Gothic style, in the tradition of Austen's *Northanger Abbey* in "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, VI (1977), 25.

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nothing more ominous than a newspaper reporter, and Joan ends up repentant.

But if *we* are to comprehend the meaning of this convoluted and improbable sounding story, we must turn not to the story proper, but to the latter episodes of "Stalked by Love." In a delightful *tour de force,* Atwood has Joan enter the deadly labyrinth of the Costume Gothic in the guise of the hero/villain's wife, Lady Felicia Redmond, who has "*red hair and green eyes and small white teeth*" just like Joan. When Felicia/Joan reaches "*the central plot*" (and I think the pun is deliberate), she finds the other four wives who clearly represent Joan's various selves:

> *"Who are you?" she asked.*
> *"We are Lady Redmond," said the middle-aged woman sadly. "All of us," the fat woman with wings added.*
> *"There must be some mistake," Felicia protested. "I myself am Lady Redmond."*
> *"Oh, yes, we know," said the first woman. "But every man has more than one wife. Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn't even know about."* (*LO,* 341)

True to the fairy tale, Joan/Felicia has opened the forbidden door to be shocked—not by murdered wives or even by Bartók's spectres, but by a story about her own multiplicity. The "central plot" of Joan's life involves this knowledge about female identity: Joan is indeed "more than double."

But what about Bluebeard who is lurking nearby preparing (Joan is sure) "to murder her as he had murdered his other wives" (*LO,* 342)? Again, in "Stalked by Love," Felicia/Joan sees that Bluebeard-Redmond embodies many men—Joan's father, the Polish Count, her poet lover, the villain from her poetry, and finally Arthur (*LO,* 342). Whether Joan fully realizes it or not, Atwood surely wishes us to follow the thread in her labyrinthine text until we see that, in the female desire to be a simple, one-sided reflection of the anima, we "kill-off" the other aspects of the feminine self, and in our unconscious rebellion against this reduction by the animus, or the male, we cast all men in the equally reductive role of Bluebeard. Thus, in *Lady Oracle,* Atwood offers us a serious parody of the Bluebeard story in which the reader must be the intrepid questioner. Joan's ultimate escape from the dark castle of her Gothic imagination, where she is pursued by her animus and tempted by the simplistic passivity of the "anima woman," is debatable,[32] and we must

[32] Joan's announcement at the end of *Lady Oracle* that she will give up Costume Gothics for science fiction and return to Toronto to extricate the friends who are charged with her murder is at least ambiguous, if not a downright indication of her failure to learn from her experience. According to Atwood, however, "she's gotten as far as saying I am who I am, take it or leave it . . ." ("An Interview with Margaret Atwood," p. 25).

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keep our wits about us if we wish to discover the contents of "the central plot" and emerge enlightened by this psychological parody-as–parable.

While *Lady Oracle* never shifts from the comic to the tragic, the very ambiguity of Joan's position at the end of the novel suggests the possibility of darker overtones. Perhaps Joan has become dangerously paranoid and seriously disconnected from reality? Perhaps it is impossible ever to free oneself or one's husband/lover from the Bluebeard syndrome? Perhaps (worst of all?) we are locked into the story, the words, the codes of mutual destruction? In the poem, "Hesitations outside the door," from *Power Politics,* Atwood considers these possibilities. Like Joan Foster, the speaker in this poem tries a variety of lies:

> I'm telling the wrong lies,
> they are not even useful.
>
> The right lies would at least
> be keys, they would open the door.[33]

But this is also a lie: the problem is not *having* the key, but deciding whether to use it because, as the next four parts of the poem make clear, the door is a kind of metaphysical either/or with this lady and her Bluebeard trapped in one or the other of two equally deadly possibilities. Either he will be seen as a murderous Bluebeard who "twists all possible/dimensions into [his] own" (*PP,* 49), or he will become a worshipping Bluebeard, like Bartók's, who insists on covering her "with flags, a dark red/season," on deleting "all other colours" (*PP,* 49).

She knows they are trapped in their mutually exclusive versions of the story in which he says,

> my other wives
> are in there, they are all
> beautiful and happy, they love me, why
> disturb them (*PP,* 50)

and she insists that the room (at this point a metaphor for her inner self) is "only/a cupboard" to hold her collection of eggs and rings. In fact, as long as they think of this relationship as an enclosure, "a house," they will remain trapped, and the poem ends in stalemate, with the protagonists still hesitating outside an illusory door of their own devising.

What this poem implies *Lady Oracle* makes explicit: we are Bluebeard, wife, and castle, repeating the story of our destruction, con-

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[33] Margaret Atwood, "Hesitations outside the door," in *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 48. Further references to the poem are included in the text.

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tinuing to think in terms of hostile dualities, reducing our relationships with ourselves, each other, and the natural world to castles, to rooms with metal doors, to spaces separated from their context, exclusive and closed.[34] Echoing Fowles, Atwood reflects, playfully in *Lady Oracle,* somberly in the poem, that,

> If I go into it
> with you I will never come out
>
> If I wait outside I can salvage
> this house or what is left
> of it, . . .
>
> but you will go alone, either way is loss. (*PP,* 51)

More recently, in her collection of stories called *Bluebeard's Egg,* Atwood presents a wife in the title story who, like the other women in the collection, is shattered by knowledge yet helpless to change or improve anything.[35] Despite this tragic impasse, these women seem unable—just as Steiner predicted of humanity in general—to "turn back . . . [to] choose the dreams of unknowing."

IV

From this selective examination of the Bluebeard tale, with some of its prototypes and modern analogues, certain points seem clear. In Bartók, Atwood, and Fowles, the structure and significance of the fairy-tale Bluebeard have been changed radically, even though its admonitory purpose remains constant. Where the fairy tale, and even a play such as Maeterlinck's, allows a happy ending which reverses the initial situation, these contemporary treatments of the subject, in fiction and opera, make their point by refusing that affirmation. The chief and seminal twentieth-century example of this dark vision is Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle.*

The question raised so emphatically by Bartók, Atwood, and Fowles is this: should we persist in seeing our world as a castle in which we either can or cannot open successive doors, or can we re-create our way of seeing our world and our place in it? If, in Fowles's terms, we refuse

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[34] The danger of dualistic thinking is a central concept in Atwood's work; it is the main theme in a poem like "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" from *The Animals in That Country* (1968), of *Surfacing* (1972), and of *Power Politics* (1972) where she explores the sexual, ideological, psychological, and, for lack of a better word, environmental ramifications of such thinking in our culture. In "You did it" from *Power Politics,* she asks, "When will you learn/the flame and the wood/flesh/it burns are whole and the same?"

[35] *Bluebeard's Egg* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1983). Because this article was completed in 1981, it has not been possible to discuss these new stories in any detail.

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to cherish the "green man" within, to emulate the Few, we will remain enslaved like or by the Cleggs/Calibans/Bluebeards of this world. To be rid of Bluebeard is to be rid of a particular mentality. If, as Atwood points out, we refuse to face the innermost truths of the psyche, and especially our own and others' multiplicity, we will remain locked in the either/or hostility of "power politics in Bluebeard's castle."[36]

While Steiner suggests that in our inevitable courting of Bluebeard we court disaster, Fowles and Atwood, it seems to me, say that we must not only open doors, but destroy the castle. That they say this in Post-Modernist terms, with the Post-Modernists' suspicion of language and form, is the final irony, for both Fowles and Atwood are moralists using form self-consciously and ironically in order to comment upon the human, especially the artistic, ability to play Bluebeard. Nevertheless (or is it because of this irony?), the logic of their warning is utterly convincing. As we hesitate outside that door, the poet reminds us,

> This is not a house, there are no doors,
> get out while it is
> open, while you still can. (*PP,* 50)

[36] The phrase is Gloria Onley's from her article "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle," *Canadian Literature,* No. 60 (1974), in which she describes the stories and poems up to 1972 as "iconoclastic keys to getting mentally outside of Bluebeard's Castle," p. 41.

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